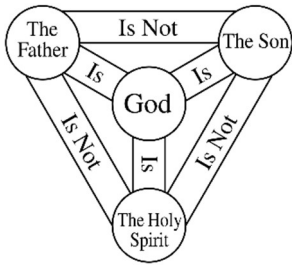


Fully Inclusive Trinity
By Bill Lawson

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Today is observed as Trinity Sunday throughout much of Western Christianity, celebrating the unity expressed through the doctrine of the Trinity. Today is also observed as Peace with Justice Sunday across The United Methodist Church. A reminder in an article, “What is Peace with Justice Sunday?” on the denominational website, says, “Our Social Principles call us to love our enemies, seek justice, and serve as reconcilers of conflict.”¹

Inclusiveness is about justice, and justice is about peace, and peace is about love, and the Bible says, “God is love.”² The Bible starts with the Creation narrative by providing imagery to support the oneness of all creation as a reflection of the oneness of God. On the night he gave himself up for us, Jesus prayed in John 17 that we all “may be made perfect in one,” or as phrased in The Message, “the glorious unity of being one.”³ The “greatest law” Jesus quoted⁴ begins,

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: [and continues] And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.⁵ [Jesus combined this law from Deuteronomy with another from Leviticus as the “second greatest commandment:”] Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.⁶

The prophet Amos, in his role as the mouthpiece of the Lord, declared in the Good News Translation, “Let justice flow like a stream, and righteousness like a river that never goes dry.”⁷

June is Pride Month,⁸ and yesterday our church participated in a ministry of presence at the Paducah PrideFest as one of the sponsors for the event. We also had a booth for providing information about Briensburg United Methodist Church and the Reconciling Ministries Network. We circulated among the crowd to meet people and share the love of Jesus. LGBTQ inclusiveness is a *justice* issue, not only in society but in the Church. It is a great and harmful injustice that people of the same gender are not allowed to be married in their own churches or by their own pastors in The United Methodist Church. It is a great and harmful injustice that practicing homosexuals are restricted from being ordained or appointed as pastors in The United Methodist Church. LGBTQ Christians *are* encouraged to participate fully in all other ministries of The United Methodist Church. We gladly recognize all the ways The United Methodist Church is actively and prominently engaged in many social justice issues worldwide. Still, we advocate for *those* harmful, restrictive, and unjust rules added to our Discipline as recently as 1974 to be removed *this year* at General Conference.

Every month of the year also has several days set aside for awareness of other important social justice issues. Health care, poverty, hunger, racism, gender inequality, gun violence, domestic violence, war, child abuse, and human trafficking are only a few of the countless grave injustices worldwide. Our individual power is limited in addressing these enormous spiritual challenges. Still, the Holy Ghost’s power to unite us has repeatedly proven to make a remarkable difference for the victims of injustice. The second of three United Methodist baptismal vows is to “accept the freedom and power God gives [us] to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.”⁹

The prophet Micah famously preached in Micah 6:8 in the Good News Translation, “The Lord has told us what is good. What [God] requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God.” Working together in harmony and peace for justice and unity is what Jesus prayed in John 17 and what the prophets, apostles, and church leaders from Augustine to Wesley have preached. God continues to call women and men to preach social holiness in our generation. The more fully and inclusively we unite in Christian love and service, the more we reflect the oneness of the fully inclusive Trinity. Paul wrote to the Ephesians as phrased in the Good News Translation:

Show your love by being tolerant with one another. Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together. There is one body and one Spirit, just as there is one hope to which God has called you. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; there is one God and Father of all people, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all.¹⁰

Humanity is created in the feminine and masculine image of God.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. (*Genesis 1:1-2 KJV*)

Two of the three persons in the Trinity are introduced in both feminine and masculine identities in the first two verses of the Bible, and the third is embodied in the masculine Incarnation of Jesus. The Creation narratives present humanity in both genders as the image of God:

So God created [humans (NRSV)] in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (*Genesis 1:27 KJV, NRSV*)¹¹

The Spirit of God, named with the feminine Hebrew noun *Ruwach* in Genesis 1:2, is the exact same Spirit named with the exact same feminine Hebrew noun in the Old Testament prophecy of Joel 2:28. She is the exact same Spirit named with the gender-neutral Greek noun in Peter's quotation of Joel in Acts 2:17, according to the Old and New Testament lexicons.¹²

Paul used the term *Godhead* to identify the fully inclusive one God in three persons who came to be referred to by the Church as the Trinity. (*Acts 17:29, Romans 1:20, Galatians 2:9 KJV*).¹³

The majesty of the Godhead is reflected in the inclusiveness of our language.

O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! (*Psalms 8:9 KJV*)

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (*Psalms 8:9 NRSV*)

From the text itself, we get a lesson on using inclusive language wherever we can and still being faithful to the spirit of the text. Archaic translations have historically supported patriarchal interpretations of Scripture and religious traditions, which are themselves unfaithful in some instances to the text. Wherever the Bible uses gender-neutral terms, and wherever we find out that the Bible uses feminine words in the original languages of the Scripture, faithfulness to the text requires that we should at least consider using inclusive language as well. In the many cases where the Bible uses masculine words to encompass both genders, such as *men* or

mankind, we should consider using words like *people* or *humanity* to emphasize the true meaning of the text instead of perpetuating false understandings.

In this verse from Psalm 8:9, the word *lord* appears twice in most English translations, although they are entirely different words in the original Hebrew text. In the first instance, the gender-neutral proper name *Yehovah* in Hebrew is translated as *LORD* in most English translations, but *Jehovah* in some, like *The Living Bible*.¹⁴ The English word *lord* typically infers a male,¹⁵ which could lead to an incorrect understanding of this proper name for God. In the second instance, the masculine Hebrew word *'adown* is also translated as *lord*.¹⁶ In this case, the word itself may literally mean a male, but since God is neither female nor male and is both feminine and masculine, the gender-neutral term would seem to be more faithful to the spirit of what the text communicates, as with the word *sovereign* used in New Revised Standard Version instead of *lord*.

One way of praising God, whose “name is majestic in all the earth,” is by reflecting the fully inclusive love of God in the words we choose.

We are sent to love everyone into fellowship with Christ and the Church.

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.
(*Matthew 28:19-20 KJV*)

The Great Commission is cited as an argument for the Trinitarian Formula in baptism and the doctrine of the Trinity. But it is more about commissioning all believers to make disciples of Jesus Christ who will become spiritually reflective of the one God in three persons. Christian discipleship is what will lead us into the oneness with God and each other pointed to by the doctrine of the Trinity. Trinitarian discipleship invites us to grow into the most expansive possible harmony and unity, reflective of the harmony and unity of the Godhead, in whose image we are created and in whom, as Paul said, “we live and move and have our being.”¹⁷

The Sacrament of Baptism is the sign that we are *all* members of the family of God. We celebrate our diversity because it reflects the diversity of God’s entire creation throughout the universe. Article IV of the United Methodist Constitution is entitled “Inclusiveness of the Church.” It states that no part of the denomination can exclude anyone “because of race, color, national origin, status or economic condition.”¹⁸ It would be impossible to specifically name all the various ways society discriminates against people in any inclusiveness list. Even in our Briensburg United Methodist Church Inclusiveness Statement, the limited number of ways we do not discriminate against people is not intended to be comprehensive. Just because some other ways are not listed in the statement does not mean we think it is okay to mistreat anyone who falls into some other category. We seek to express the *fulness and unity* of the Trinity through the official Inclusiveness Statement of our congregation:

We invite everyone to share fully in the worship services, life, ministry, and leadership of Briensburg United Methodist Church, inclusive of age, race, nationality, gender, LGBTQ, theology, politics, and legal status.¹⁹

The Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 means that Jesus Christ commissions us to make

disciples. With our baptism comes our authority in the church to connect with other people and join them in spiritual discovery as we all grow together in our relationships with the Triune God. In another section entitled “The Heart of Christian Ministry,” the *Discipline* confirms, “All Christians are called through their baptism to this ministry of servanthood in the world to the glory of God and for human fulfillment.”²⁰

We are sent, just like the Apostles, to teach the vision of Christ for humanity. There is plenty for us to learn, and plenty for us to teach, about God’s love and God’s dream for humanity. The “Sermon on the Mount” is full of material that anyone can find helpful regardless of their religious beliefs. “The Love Chapter,” 1 Corinthians 13, is packed with guidance for anyone wanting to know more about love. The “Golden Rule” is repeated virtually word for word in many other religions and as a secular ethical principle.²¹ Whatever point someone starts their journey as a disciple, that is, as a student of Jesus, they will continue from there to build on the other teachings of Christ. Together, we are all growing into the one Body of Christ until, as Paul wrote, “we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect [person], unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”²²

We are not sent *alone* by any means. Nor are we sent under our own name and authority. Jesus promises to be with us the entire time – *always* is his word. So, when we are making disciples, when we are baptizing, when we are teaching, we are doing so in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

Paul expressed the fully inclusive Trinitarian blessing in his letter to the Corinthians:

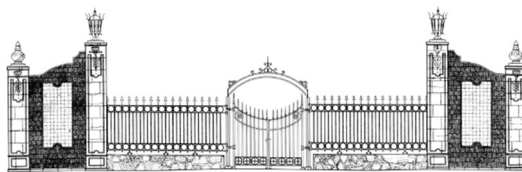
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen. (*2 Corinthians 13:14 KJV*)

The amazing grace of the Master, Jesus Christ, the extravagant love of God, the intimate friendship of the Holy Spirit, be with all of you. (*2 Corinthians 13:14 MSG*)

Conclusion

Christ Jesus sends each of us to make disciples of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. She is transforming the world through her fully inclusive love and presence. She empowers us in love to continue the ministry and vision of Jesus through all our relationships.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



Fully Inclusive Trinity

Manuscript of the sermon preached by Rev. Bill Lawson on June 4, 2023, at Briensburg UMC
Bible Readings for Holy Trinity & Peace with Justice Sunday, Revised Common Lectionary
Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

Acknowledgments

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- ⁴ Matthew 22:36-40.
- ⁵ Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (KJV).
- ⁶ Leviticus 19:18 (KJV).
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